

VZCZCXRO2134

RR RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHLA RUEHMRE RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHSK #1221/01 3281439

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

R 241439Z NOV 06 ZDK

FM AMEMBASSY MINSK

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5359

INFO RUCNOSC/ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY COOPERATION IN EUROPE

RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 1349

RUEHBS/USMISSION USEU 01540

RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE

RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 001221

SIPDIS

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DEPT ALSO FOR INR
KIEV ALSO FOR USAID

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/24/2016

TAGS: PGOV PINR PREL BO

SUBJECT: POLITICAL PARTY DEPUTIES POINT FINGERS WHILE
MEETING AMBASSADOR

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Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

¶11. (C) Ambassador on November 17 met with deputy leaders of pro-democratic political parties to gauge the unity within the coalition and the progress in the local council elections. The deputy leaders reported a small victory in receiving registration for most of their initiative groups, although they cited cases of harassment from the authorities that resulted in several registration denials. Milinkevich's "For Freedom" movement has fallen on deaf ears among several key coalition political parties who believe the movement would further divide the coalition. Although they realized that the coalition's inactivity was a problem, deputy leaders refused to take responsibility or blamed each other for the lack of forward movement. The coalition generally remains united in the local election process and in the preparations for another democratic congress, but their heated debate indicated that the coalition parties have difficulty finding common ground on what they should do next. End summary.

¶12. (C) Ambassador in a November 17 introductory meeting met with deputy heads of the Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC) Elena Skrigan, Belarusian Social Democratic Party (BSDP) Anatoliy Levkovich, Belarusian National Front (BNF) Viktor Ivashevich, United Civic Party (UCP) Igor Shinkarik, and coordinator for coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich's "For Freedom" movement, Viktor Koroneyenko. According to the deputies, the United Democratic Forces (UDF) coalition had internal problems, but member organizations remain committed to pursuing democratic change.

Elections Proving to Be a Farce, As Expected

¶13. (C) The party deputies reiterated to Ambassador that authorities had already determined the results of the local council elections scheduled for January 14, 2007, and would take adequate measures to ensure that opposition activists were excluded from the councils. Therefore, the coalition would use the elections as a legal means to meet with citizens and distribute information. The latest stage in the election process, the registration of initiative groups, or those groups that nominate an individual as a candidate and gather signatures for his/her registration generally did not pose a major obstacle for opposition political parties. The

UCP successfully registered 162 initiative groups, the BPC - 220, the BNF - 140, and the BSDP - 142.

14. (C) However, the deputies claimed that election commissions denied several initiative groups registration for ridiculous reasons. In the most public cases, election commissions denied UCP leader Anatoliy Lebedko's and BPC leader Sergey Kalyakin's initiative groups registration because several initiative group members were allegedly "coerced" into participating or included in the groups without their consent. This was the reason most commonly used by authorities to deny registration. Leader of the Belarusian Party of Freedom and Progress Vladimir Novasyad in a November 14 meeting with Pol/Econ Chief and Poloff cited multiple instances of authorities pressuring his initiative group members into claiming that they were "coerced" into participating. In many cases, factory directors and university deans called into their offices members of initiative groups for "chats" about their political activities within an hour after the activists applied for registration at the election commissions. BNF deputy Andrei Sarotnik on November 14 confirmed to Poloff Novasyad's claims, adding that Belarusian KGB officers were present in many of the meetings.

Self-Preservation More Important Than Elections

15. (C) Levkovich told Ambassador that as a precaution, the BSDP advised all activists to abandon their election activities if they were threatened with job loss or school eviction because the BSDP did not have the resources to support them in case of dismissal. Ivashkevich noted that for this reason, most of the BNF's initiative group members and candidate hopefuls were not employees of state industries. BPC deputy Skrigan told Ambassador that such precautions might work in the city, but in the regions they were not enough to avoid the authorities' pressure. The

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population in the regions is significantly sparser, making it easier for authorities to determine who is supporting the opposition, even through voter ballots. According to Skrigan, the BPC will continue to monitor GOB harassment and will encourage members to drop out of the race should the harassment increase.

Who Is At Fault For Coalition Inactivity?

16. (C) The political party deputies argued loudly about who was to blame for problems within the coalition, including its inactivity. Levkovich, whose BSDP is not part of the coalition, chastised the UDF for wasting six months after presidential elections on power struggles and writing plans rather than continuing the fight when they had the support of the masses. According to Levkovich, the coalition immediately following the elections should have analyzed the pros and cons of their campaign, including who were the most effective leaders and activists. If changes had been made right away, more progress could have been made.

17. (C) Ivashkevich and Shinkarik named Milinkevich's "For Freedom" movement as a contributor to fragmentation within the coalition. Korneyenko tersely refuted the accusations, stressing that the movement was the answer to the coalition's inactivity and reflected the wishes of many disgruntled regional activists. He told Ambassador that he wanted to correct the "misinformation" about the movement, claiming it was not a political party and would encourage all UDF parties to join. Ivashkevich cautioned that if all parties joined, the movement had the possibility to replace the UDF. Korneyenko reassured the party deputies that the movement's purpose was to carry out street actions to attain free and fair elections. Once this was achieved, the movement would disband.

¶8. (C) Shinkarik scoffed at the movement's purpose, noting that the opposition had created the Five Plus Coalition (which developed into the UDF) for the same reason. Korneyenko agreed, but noted the coalition's ineffectiveness in pursuing this goal and its negative effect on Milinkevich's reputation as a leader. Levkovich quickly responded that if Milinkevich wanted to have the respect of an active leader, then he should be standing outside the prison where authorities are holding Kozulin and demanding his release. If Milinkevich wanted activity, Levkovich argued, he should have used Qozulin's arrest as motivation to continue with the street actions that occurred during the presidential elections.

A Second Congress Might Help

¶9. (C) All the political deputies agreed that a second congress would eliminate some of the problems among the UDF national leadership, though not all of them. Ivashkevich noted that at the first congress half of the participants were upset that Milinkevich was elected as the coalition candidate. At the second congress, delegates will elect a chair of the UDF political council with more responsibility and authority. Regardless of the outcome, people's ambitions will be hurt.

Comment

¶10. (C) The Ambassador's meeting with the political party deputies underscored the unity within the UDF on general issues such as the local council elections and a second congress. However, the heated arguments - which contrasted with the restraint usually shown by the UDF's most senior leaders - demonstrated the active fissures@within the coalition. Ironically, one of the main dividing issues is each party's attempt to set the course of the coalition following the local elections and congress. As reported previously, Milinkevich's "For Freedom" movement thus far has not struck a chord with his UDF colleagues, who fear the movement would decrease their support base. The repression of Lukashenko's dictatorial regime continues to be the strongest unifier of the opposition forces, but their excessive focus on internal organization rather than on their Belarusian audience is a clear constraint on their effectiveness.

Stewart